

“Bitter Water”
Exodus 14:19-31
September 13, 2020
Rev. David Hutchinson

Can you imagine - - what FREEDOM feels like?

Or maybe - - can you remember...?

That LIGHT, ANXIOUS feeling of RELIEF...

Tentative. And also frightening.

To be unburdened.

Liberated.

Pushed out into the unknown.

Imaging an eagle taking flight off the edge of a VAST cliffside in the mountains of Utah.

The Grand Tetons. The Rockies.

Imagine the TRAINING WHEELS coming off your bicycle for the first time.

Your FIRST CAR.

Your one year anniversary - of quitting SMOKING, or DRINKING.

To be FREE is to be FULLY ALIVE in a way that is INVIGORATING and
TERRIFYING at the same time.

Could that be how the ISRAELITES felt as they crossed through that Red Sea -- and
looked back as the WATERS CLOSED behind them -- and they were FREE for the first time ?

I remember one of my first trips to New York City as a student. I remember feeling this
MIXTURE of EXCITEMENT and TERROR which is brought on by freedom. / I recall
struggling with my luggage -- hobbling around the airport -- once I had finally FOUND the
airport -- and then making my way to the BUS STOP. / When the bus finally arrived, the man
behind me said something that I could NOT UNDERSTAND.

"Excuse me", I said, "Could you repeat that?" / He mumbled the EXACT same sounds.
/ He had repeated it, and it sounded exactly the same to me - impossible to understand.

At that moment, I looked at him and made a JUDGEMENT:

I figured he must want something FROM me. / I was, after all, out on my own, in the big bad world. / Free. / Independent. / And at this moment wanting my mommy.

So I said to him, "No, I'm sorry, I don't have any change to spare." I was guessing at what he wanted - based on my assumptions about freedom - and my assumptions about how the world was going to work now that I was on my own.

He looked at me with a funny look, and grabbed my suitcase - -

- - and carried it right onto the bus for me.

"I just wanted to help you out with your luggage", he said.

Then he showed his ticket to the bus driver and sat down in the seat behind me.

I began to learn something - at that moment - something that I am STILL learning: that there is MORE THAN ONE WAY to venture out into the world. More than one way - to exercise that God given freedom - which is life.

We can go through life with WALLS up around us - - or we can break down walls.

There is a book about a man who BROKE DOWN a few walls -- as he CROSSED a SEA -- to come to a new land. The book is called "Kaffir Boy" and tells the story of a black tennis player, named Mark Mathebane, who, several years ago now, came to America on a tennis scholarship, from South Africa.

He admits that he was glad to leave the problems of his homeland behind.

But even so, he tells of his ATTACHMENT to home. / He writes, ". . .even now, far, far away from home, I can still hear mama's voice, echoing through the valley of a thousand hills, calling me to come home - for supper around the fireside."

He is attached to home, and yet, he says: "I was, like Tennyson's Ulysses, "a part of all I had met."

Attached to home - - - and yet a part of all he had met.

His experience speaks to us - - of a TENSION - - which exists in the experience of FREEDOM.

As we break DOWN those WALLS which separate EACH one of us from someone else -
- WHAT attachments will we MAINTAIN ??

The Israelites - in this morning's scripture reading - are venturing out. They cross the Red Sea into a NEW and UNKNOWN freedom. A foreign LAND. Feeling excitement and probably fear. / And they take with them certain ATTACHMENTS. / They take CUSTOMS, and memories, and friendships, families. . . The Israelites will forever remember the night of the Passover when the angel of death chose to spare them.

. . . and YET - - there is also a NECESSARY closing off.

The sea CRASHES shut, and closes off any chance of return. The Chariot wheels of the Pharaoh's army STICK in the mud - - and the People of Israel are FREE.

And they are FREE - from certain parts of their past.

Protected - by a WALL of water - - from slavery to the Egyptians.

And SUDDENLY they have a new IDENTITY. They are no longer SLAVES - - they are A PEOPLE. / They are a NATION. / Israel.

And then - - they are FREE.

Are we - - at all - - like them?

Are there attachments we need - - to each other - - and to God.

We a PEOPLE...

With an identity - - Christians - - Americans - - an identity that CONNECTS us to people we haven't even MET. The WATER of BAPTISM - - sets us free - - like that water in the Red Sea - - set the Hebrew people free. /

For us - - our WATER - - is a water of rebirth - - through the death and resurrection of Christ. / And the FREEDOM that God offers us through Jesus.

BUT - - there are also things in our lives - we need to CLOSE ourselves off from - things that ENSLAVE us - things that walls might PROTECT us from - - things from which we CAN be FREE.

That's what Jesus HAS DONE - for countless people.

They have been set FREE.

We are somehow LINKED with - - those people we have never met.

Walls are broken down.

Walls of language and custom.

Invisible walls.

AND - we are also freed from all that is sinful and destructive - by an invisible wall that will protect us.

But FREEDOM can also become - - FEAR - - in an instant.

Water - - can become bitter.

The Hebrews were set free through a wall of water - - and the NEXT time they encounter water - -it is too BITTER for them to drink. / They COMPLAIN about their new freedom.

Look at chapter 15, verses 22-23 in Exodus:

Just after the Hebrews have been freed by passing through the water of the sea, they arrive at a place called Marah. / And there they look for WATER to DRINK in the wilderness.

But the water they discover is bitter.

It is the VERY NEXT VERSE!

Verse 21 says that the sea water closed over the army that had pursued them.

Actually Miriam SINGS it!

Then in verse 22 it says they found NO water in the wilderness.

From MORE water than anyone could imagine or drink... TO - - NO water at all.

And then in verse 23 they arrive at a place called Marah and the ONLY water - - is bitter water that they can not drink. / And then - - they complain - - because they are AFRAID.

God and Moses immediately make the water - - drinkable.

But the Hebrews fear - - has been revealed.

Their THIN veneer of trust - - has chipped away...

Walls of slavery - - have given way - - to a desire for walls of protection.

There is a poem called the "Invisible Wall" that goes like this:

At the Art Reception

held in a Modern Bank
 my daughter ran full speed
 into a wall of glass
 ricocheted five feet
 and, for a second,
 lay stunned.

'till screams echoed through the lobby.

guests sipping wine,

turned with a chorus of eyes.

I picked my wounded butterfly off the floor

her screams turning to sobs,

a red welt rising on her forehead

and together we examined that invisible wall

that comes out of nowhere

and knocks us flat

without any interest.

Are there invisible walls of our own making, that close us off from God?

Have you ever felt like this little girl: knocked flat - - by life?

There ARE invisible walls of PROTECTION - - by which God will separate us from all that is destructive in our lives - - like the WALLS of WATER which separated the Israelites forever - - from their history of slavery.

But ALONG WITH that protection - that God offers - -

- - there comes a FREEDOM.

A freedom which can be scary.

Because as we become FREE from all that enslaves us - -

and separates us from others - -

we come to see that we are CONNECTED to those around us.

- - and that is HOW we are - - connected to God.

Freedom and responsibility are connected.

Discipleship and citizenship - - are the connection.

If we understand the nature of our freedom - - then - - we will live in the commitment and the connections of - - discipleship and citizenship.

We have been set free - - but for WHAT?

Freedom ALWAYS begs the question: now what?

Now - - what will we do - - with our freedom?

Will we become bitter - - and afraid - - and mean - - and disconnected?

Or will we live in hope and trust?

It seems to me that there are TWO kinds of fear:

Bitter fear... And TRUST fear.

Fear doesn't just GO AWAY in this life.

But what will YOU do in your fear?

Will it be: bitter fear - - or trust fear?

Will we complain? / Will we blame others?

Will we cause hurt and be hurt - - in our fear and anger?

OR - - will we trust that GOD is in this?

God is calling us - - to something new.

We are set free - - by the amazing LOVE of God in Christ.

Think about that... Take that in...

Feel - - what freedom feels like.

We are free.

So - - NOW what? Now what?